

Contracting officer experiences frontline action in Iraq

SHEPPARD AIR FORCE BASE, Texas — First Lt. **Ed Ruckwardt** was in his office, wrapping up some contracts he'd worked the previous few days. It was typical of the lieutenant's duties — nothing extravagant or special about the contracts.

But the quietness of the day was interrupted by a loud explosion that made the ground rumble under his feet and his trailer shake. A mortar round landed about 30 yards from his trailer, sending pieces of shrapnel flying like shards of glass through the air.

"There was a Marine already administering first aid to one of the injured individuals," said the lieutenant, deployed from 82nd

courtesy photo



First Lt. Ed Ruckwardt and members of the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force take a break after sweeping an area. The lieutenant's primary job is to purchase items for the Iraqi security forces in the western portion of the country. He's deployed from the 82nd Contracting Squadron at Sheppard Air Force Base, Texas.

Contracting Squadron with the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force's Quick Response Force Contingency Contracting office. "I quickly turned my attention to the other injured victim."

Lieutenant Ruckwardt is one of six officers from the Air Force and Navy who are assigned to six major subordinate commands in Iraq. His team approves projects including reconstruction or repair of buildings, office equipment, uniforms, transportation, training and emergency life support for Iraqi security forces, he said.

The highlight of his job, though, is witnessing the interoperability of sister services.

"Our job as U.S. [servicemem-

bers] is to make the mission happen as one, and so far we have done an amazing job," he said.

The lieutenant has contracted more than \$3.5 million in purchases for Iraqi security forces to include the Iraqi police, national guard, army and highway patrol, plus the border enforcement, public order battalions and facility protection service. He has also assisted in developing Navy Seabee construction contracts worth about \$15 million.

Though the lieutenant has been in Iraq since October, his job in the western part of the country is no different than at Sheppard Air Force Base, Texas. The atmosphere, however, is markedly different.

He was on a convoy in Ar Ramadi, Iraq, and the group got caught in some heavy traffic. Normal protocol requires all passengers to get out of the vehicles and set up a security perimeter. Regardless of who they are, the lieutenant said when with the Marines, they are riflemen first. Lieutenant Ruckwardt took his position on one knee next to the vehicle with an ammunition magazine inserted and a round in the chamber.

"At one point, I remember I was on one knee with an M-16, actively scanning, and I thought to myself, 'What am I doing out here? I'm not infantry,'" he said. "Ar Ramadi is one of the most dangerous areas in Iraq, and here I was, an Airman, right in the middle of the action."

Serving with frontline units like the 1st MEF never entered the lieutenant's mind. But, he said he would not trade what he has learned while with his Marine brothers.

"Marines are put in harm's way daily in the most dangerous areas of Iraq without complaining or hesitation," he said. "It has been a great pleasure to serve alongside [them]."

John Ingle

82nd Training Wing Public Affairs